On: 16 July 2013, At: 02:24
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Intellectual History Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rihr20

'The Link which Unites Man with Brutes': Enlightenment Feminism, Women and Animals

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Published online: 11 Jul 2012.

To cite this article: Jane Spencer (2012) 'The Link which Unites Man with Brutes': Enlightenment Feminism, Women and Animals, Intellectual History Review, 22:3, 427-444, DOI: 10.1080/17496977.2012.695194

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2012.695194

Intellectual History Review 22(3) September 2012: 427–444

'The Link which Unites Man with Brutes': Enlightenment Feminism, Women and Animals

Jane Spencer

In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft suggests that in the current state of society it is open to question whether or not woman is 'the link which unites man with brutes'.[1] In this essay I investigate the reasons for and significance of this provocative claim, hoping thereby to illuminate some of the issues raised for feminism by the natural history of the later eighteenth century.[2] Recent scholarship has shown how much the development of feminism owed both to fundamentally religious arguments and attitudes,[3] and to the Enlightenment science of culture with its progressive understanding of history.[4] As Sharon Ruston demonstrates, eighteenth-century natural history is also an important source for those arguing for rights for women.[5] I argue here that accounts within natural history of the relationship between animals and humanity had a significant, complex, and often problematic influence on the development of Enlightenment feminism.

Wollstonecraft's reference to woman as the link with brutes comes within a passage of speculation about the improvement of human knowledge in the egalitarian world of the future:

[1] M. Wollstonecraft, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by M. Butler and J. Todd, 7 vols (London: William Pickering, 1989), vol. 5, 104.

[2] This essay forms part of my AHRC-funded project 'Representing Animals in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Natural History, Narrative Sympathy, and Animal and Human Rights'. I am grateful to the AHRC for its generosity in supporting this project through its Research Leave Scheme in 2009. I would also like to thank the University of Exeter for awarding me a semester's leave in 2008–9 in support of this project.

[3] *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, edited by S. Knott and B. Taylor (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), xv–xxi; Section 7, 410–518.

[4] K. O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–34, 68–109.

[5] See S. Ruston, 'Natural Rights and Natural History in Anna Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft', in *Essays and Studies 2008: Literature and Science*, edited by S. Ruston (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2008), 53–71; and '"How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!" Women and Domestic Animals in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindications*', paper delivered at the Eighteenth-Century Narrative Research Consortium conference, 'Romantic Animals', July 2008, University of Exeter. I am very much indebted to Sharon Ruston's important work on this topic, and would like to thank her for her generosity in answering my queries, exchanging ideas with me and sharing a copy of her unpublished paper. My specific debts to her work, as well as the different emphasis of my own argument, are made clear later in this essay.

Intellectual History Review
ISSN 1749-6977 print/ISSN 1749-6985 online

http://www.tandfonline.com/journals http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2012.695194

> It is difficult for us purblind mortals to say to what height human discoveries and improvements may arrive, when the gloom of despotism subsides, which makes us stumble at every step; but, when morality shall be settled on a more solid basis, then, without being gifted with a prophetic spirit, I will venture to predict that woman will be either the friend or slave of man. We shall not, as at present, doubt whether she is a moral agent, or the link which unites man with brutes. But should it then appear that like the brutes they were principally created for the use of man, he will let them patiently bite the bridle, and not mock them with empty praise; or, should their rationality be proved, he will not impede their improvement merely to gratify his sensual appetites.[6]

This passage sounds some of the keynotes of Enlightenment feminism: a belief in the essential rational equality of human beings regardless of sex, and a commitment to the possibility of social progress. Enlightenment is indeed one of its governing metaphors: we live at present under the 'gloom of despotism' and are consequently stumbling, unable to see our way; but once this gloom is lifted we will be capable of new discoveries and improvements. The unnatural despotism of contemporary society has so distorted relations between the sexes that, in fact, we currently do not know what woman in a natural state would be like. After social revolution, we can expect to find out. 'We shall not, as at present, doubt whether she is a moral agent, or the link which unites man with brutes'. I would not want to downplay the lovely sarcasm of the sentence: Wollstonecraft, of course, is arguing throughout this work that women were indeed created as rational, and therefore moral agents, and she curls her lip at those who think them a kind of intermediate point between human and animal. But her sardonic tone does not detract from an underlying seriousness. Throughout the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft takes seriously the charge that women, at least under current social arrangements, are like animals: comparisons, as here, to horses, or elsewhere in the text to caged birds,[7] and to spaniels, proverbial for their submissiveness,[8] give a lively sense of her recognition of the relevance to human society of natural historians' accounts of domesticated animals. It is through her confrontation with some of the claims being made by natural historians that Wollstonecraft develops arguments with which to counter that early English opponent of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke, whose conservatism on social hierarchy demanded her response. Her dialogue with natural history helped to form Wollstonecraft's particular kind of pro-Revolutionary feminism.

'The link which unites man with brutes'. What exactly does Wollstonecraft mean? How might woman be thought of as forming a link between man and animal? In that one word, 'link', Wollstonecraft evokes two influential and interrelated discourses. One is the discourse surrounding the great chain of being, which, as A.O. Lovejoy's classic account showed, drew on Platonic and Aristotelian ideas and was widely influential among European thinkers from the middle ages through to the late eighteenth century. It worked by bringing together what Lovejoy named the two principles of plenitude and continuity. The (Platonic) principle of plenitude is the belief that God, as the perfect and inexhaustible source of all creation, must have created all the kinds of being that it was possible for Him to create: no potential for existence can have been left unfulfilled.[9] The (Aristotelian) principle of continuity is the belief that Nature does not contain clear and strict divisions between one kind of entity and another. While Plato considered

[6] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 104.
[7] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 125.
[8] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 152.
[9] A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 50–5.

that entities were hierarchically ordered, Aristotle was the main source for later naturalists' arrangement of life into a hierarchical series from the highest to lowest forms of existence.[10] The steps between one kind of existence and the next were understood to be vanishingly small. Between any two different kinds of being there would always be something which partook of the nature of both: the classic example being man himself, who belonged both to the animal world below him, and the spiritual world (of cherubim, angels, and so on) above him.[11] A link is the perfect metaphor for this conception of continuity and overlap: each link in a chain only belongs to (and helps constitute) the chain by virtue of overlapping and interlocking with the links on either side.

While the notion of a single hierarchical chain or scale was increasingly questioned by the end of the eighteenth century, it remained an influential idea even among many of those committed to challenging human hierarchies. In 1790 Catherine Macaulay, radical egalitarian and Enlightenment feminist, could still write: 'That there is a chain of subordination which gradually descends from the highest possible excellence which can be enjoyed by a finite being, down to the lowest form of animated life, we have great cause to believe'.[12] Macaulay had a profound influence on Wollstonecraft, who adopted and developed many ideas from the *Letters on Education* in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, but the two writers differed on the question of the chain.

The other, related discourse which Wollstonecraft evokes with her reference to the 'link' is contemporary natural history. She lived in an age when European knowledge of the natural world had been transformed by empirical investigations into animal and plant life, as well as by the discovery of new species in the course of global exploration.[13] The Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus had worked out and published, in the successive editions of his *Systema Natura*, from 1735 onwards, a method for organising nature into orders, families, genera and species that forms the basis for modern taxonomy.[14] The French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, had provided in his multi-volume *Histoire Naturelle*, published from 1749 to 1788, a detailed account of the characteristics of a huge number of quadrupeds, birds, fish, insects, plants, minerals and other natural phenomena, which was translated into English and widely disseminated.[15] The second half of the eighteenth century was a time of intense interest in natural history, with popular adaptations and compendiums making new discoveries and ideas widely available to a growing middle-class audience. Wollstonecraft was well-read in this tradition. Among her assignments as a writer for Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review* was an abridged English version of Buffon's *Natural History* in 1790.[16] In the same year she wrote an extensive review[17] of William Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History*, a series of reflections on the philosophical and social implications of the natural historians' discoveries: a work with which, as we will see, she had some major disagreements.

[10] Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 55–8.
[11] Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 227, 231.
[12] C. Macaulay, *Letters on Education. With Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (London, 1790), 8–9.
[13] See D.E. Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History* (London: Penguin, 1976).
[14] C. Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae,* 10th edition 1758, facsimile (London: British Museum, 1956); W.T. Stearn, 'Appendix 1', in W. Blunt, *Linnaeus: The Compleat Naturalist*, introduction by W.T. Stearn (London: Francis Lincoln, 2004), 256–63.
[15] G.L.L. comte de Buffon, *The Natural History of Animals, Vegetables, and Minerals; with the Theory of the Earth in General,* translated by W. Kenrick and J. Murdoch, 6 vols (London, 1775–6); *Natural History, General and Particular*, translated by W. Smellie, 9 vols (Edinburgh, 1780–5).
[16] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 7, 411.
[17] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 7, 293–300.

Eighteenth-century natural historians continued to fit their new ideas into the frame of the chain of being.[18] Their understanding of the variety of living species grew within the idea of a single, continuous scale along which all living organisms could be placed, from 'lower' to 'higher'. The application of the principle of continuity to natural history meant that they saw distinctions between species and kinds as finely graduated. The application of the principle of plenitude meant that God must have created all possible varieties. Put these two together and, in theory, wherever two distinct beings are found next to each other on the chain it should be possible to find a third being in between the two with characteristics of both – the 'link' between them. The borderline between plant and animal, for example, was in principle a very fine one. There must be something that was both plant- and animal-like. The freshwater polyp *Hydra* was hailed as missing link between plants and animals, moving like an animal but reproducing like a plant.[19] Wherever there seemed to be a big division between kinds of being, a link could be found. As the Swiss naturalist Charles Bonnet explained:

> THERE are no sudden changes in nature; all is gradual, and elegantly varied. If there should happen a vacuum between any two beings, how could the passage be effected from one to the other? There is then no being which has not either above or beneath it some that resemble it in certain characters, and widely differ from it in others.
>
> Amongst these characters which distinguish beings, we discover some that are more or less general. Whence we derive our distributions into classes, genera, and species.
>
> These distributions cannot cut off any thing. There always consist between two classes and two like genera, *mean* productions, which seem not to belong more to one than to the other, but to connect them both.
>
> The polypus links the vegetable to the animal. The flying squirrel unites the bird to the quadruped. The ape bears some affinity to the quadruped and the man.[20]

In the search for missing links, one link in particular seemed significant – the connection between humanity and the non-human animals. The border between humanity and the 'brute' beasts particularly fascinated, and troubled, eighteenth-century thinkers, as the chain's principle of continuity had the potential to threaten the sense of a clear demarcation between human and animal. Natural historians looked to 'lower' kinds of human being for an affinity with the 'brute' beasts, and to the 'higher' animals for similarities with 'mankind'.[21]

In this context we can begin to see why Wollstonecraft refers to 'the link which unites man with brutes'. But why does she, however ironically, suggest that woman, in her current state, might fulfil that role? One reason for the connection is easily found. As more recent generations of feminist scholarship have amply demonstrated, woman and non-human animals have been conjoined in the history of Western thought.[22] In the Greek philosophic tradition, and in the later Christian

[18] Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 227–30; F. Moran, 'Between Primates and Primitives: Natural Man as the Missing Link in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54:1 (1993), 37–58.
[19] Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 231–3.
[20] C. Bonnet, *The Contemplation of Nature. Translated from the French of C. Bonnet*, 2 vols (London, 1766), vol. 1, 24.
[21] On this see W.D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin, 1969); R. Nash, *Wild Enlightenment: The Borders of Human Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003); L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).
[22] G. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1984); V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

doctrines that draw so heavily upon it, woman is extensively construed as a lesser or imperfect human being, partaking only partially or sometimes not at all in the higher reason that characterizes the proper perfection of man's nature. Where man is understood as a partially spiritual and intellectual, partly animal and bodily, being, woman is seen as existing closer to that lower, bodily, animal nature and often as threatening, through the force of her sexuality, to drag her male companion down towards the animal realm. Within eighteenth-century satire there are some references to women's alleged affinity with monkeys. Jonathan Swift, in a widely reprinted and popular letter to a bride, wrote:

> when you are among yourselves, how naturally, after the first compliments, do you apply your hands to each others [sic] lappets, ruffles, and mantuas; as if the whole business of your lives, and the publick concern of the world, depended upon the cut and colour of your dresses. As divines say, that some people take more pains to be damned, than it would cost them to be saved; so your sex employs more thought, memory, and application to be fools, than would serve to make them wise and useful. When I reflect on this, I cannot conceive you to be human creatures, but a sort of species hardly a degree above a monkey; who has more diverting tricks than any of you, is an animal less mischievous and expensive, might in time be a tolerable critick in velvet and brocade, and, for aught I know, would equally become them.[23]

Wollstonecraft noted this passage in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* taking issue with the idea that woman 'naturally' act in this way: 'And very natural it is – for they have not any business to interest them', she wrote. To stop women being monkeys, in her view, would mean 'turning their thoughts to the grand pursuits that exalt the human race'.[24]

In serious natural history of the time, however, woman is not said to be the link which unites man with brutes. That distinction is usually given to the 'orang-outang', a term derived from the Malay for 'man of the woods', introduced into European natural history by Nicolaas Tulp in the seventeenth century,[25] and commonly applied in the eighteenth century to the large apes both of Asia and Africa – to the animals we now call orangutans and also to chimpanzees.[26] Edward Tyson's influential 1699 account of his dissection of an orang-outang (in fact a chimpanzee) established the close anatomical similarities between this animal and humanity.[27] In 1790, Smellie distilled the received wisdom of the past century when he observed:

> In descending the scale of animation, the next step, it is humiliating to remark, is very short. Man, in his lowest condition, is evidently linked, both in the form of his body and the capacity of his mind, to the large and small orang-outangs. These again, by another slight gradation, are connected to the apes,

[23] J. Swift, *The Works of the Rev. Dr. Swift* (London, 1784), vol. 5, 147.
[24] Wollstonecraft, Works, Vol. 5, 259.
[25] N. Tulp, *Observationum Medicarum, libri tres* (Amsterdam, 1641), 274.
[26] C. Niekirk, 'Man and Orang-utan in Eighteenth-Century Thinking: Retracing the history of Dutch and German Anthropology', *Monatshefte*, 96:4 (2004), 477–92. I use the term 'orang-outang' throughout to refer to the animal as discussed in eighteenth-century accounts, to maintain a distinction between the animal of eighteenth-century conception and the orangutans, chimpanzees and other great apes as classified today. Moran points out that that various animals were discussed using the term 'orang-outang' and that many of those speculating on the orang-outang's relation to humanity had not seen great apes and were relying on the anthropomorphic accounts of travellers, so that when considering their views 'it is best to try to erase any preconceptions one might have about the kind of animal being discussed and imagine that one has never seen a chimpanzee, orang-utan, or gorilla' (39).
[27] R. Wokler, 'Tyson and Buffon on the Orang-utan', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 155 (1976), 2301–19.

> who, like the former, have no tails […] The monkeys, who form the next link, have long tails, and terminate this partial chain of imitative animals, which have such a detestable resemblance to the human frame and manners.[28]

Eighteenth-century naturalists frequently depicted the orang-outang in ways that emphasized this link with humanity. Tyson's illustration of a male walking upright and holding a stick was frequently reprinted, while one of Tulp's illustrations of an orang-outang in a seated pose with genitals hidden and eyes averted was widely copied and presented as a 'modest' female.[29]

Some thinkers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his 1755 *Discourse on Inequality* and the Scottish philosopher Lord Monboddo, went so far as to see the orang-outang as a human being in a primitive state prior to the acquisition of language.[30] Most authorities, though, maintained that the orang-outang was a brute beast to be clearly differentiated from mankind. So, in keeping with the principles of plenitude and continuity, it was still necessary to search for a link on the human side – a sort of sub-human type that was closer to the orang-outang than most mankind. This link was sought in an inferior race. In the passage from his *Philosophy of Natural History* cited above, Smellie refers to 'Man, in his lowest condition' as being close to the 'orang-outang'. A little earlier in the same work he makes it clear that the definition of man 'in his lowest condition' is a racial one: he refers to the 'stupid Huron' and the 'Hottentot' as the kinds of human being furthest away from the high condition of the 'profound philosopher' (522). In this he is typical of his time. Rather than one of the human genders, it was a human race that was assigned the place on the chain next to the orang-outang: most often, black Africans were the people chosen for this position.[31] Indeed the eighteenth-century notion of female nature as complementary to, rather than simply lesser than, male nature, was rather at odds with the linear hierarchy of the chain of being, making it difficult to know how to fit women into the chain.[32]

The affinity between the lowest human and the highest brute was however usually demonstrated through a female sexual route. Male orang-outangs were thought to rape Hottentot women,[33] making the lowest human female the sexual victim of the highest brute male; conversely, female chimps were believed to exhibit a sexual modesty very like that of well-brought-up European women, implying that modesty as a sexual virtue was not, as Wollstonecraft argued, an artificial human construct, but a natural female attribute shared by different species.[34] So the implications of the orang-outang as link were interpreted to the detriment of women, implying their less than full human separation from the highest ape. Wollstonecraft, whose reading in

[28] W. Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History* (Edinburgh, 1790), 523.

[29] The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century illustrations of apes are discussed in Moran, 'Between Primates and Primitives'; Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*; and Niekerk, 'Man and Orang-utan in Eighteenth-Century Thinking'; and in M. Kemp, *The Human Animal in Western Art and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Kemp (188) considers Tulp's illustration of the orang-outang (in this case a chimpanzee) to be a male, but later copies of this image interpreted it as female and added feminising touches (Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 106). Schiebinger (75–114) discusses the emphasis on modesty and manners – but also the concentration on genitals and breasts – in discussions of female apes, and reproduces the most important of the contemporary illustrations.

[30] J-J Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, translated by M. Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984); J.B. Lord Monboddo, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1773). See R. Wokler, 'The Ape Debates in Enlightenment Anthropology', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 192 (1980), 1164–75.

[31] W.D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1969), 228–32.

[32] Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 158–9.

[33] Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 94–8.

[34] Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 99–106.

natural history would have made her familiar with this idea, may well have been prompted by it to make her satiric substitute of woman as the missing link in place of the usual suspect.

There are also, I shall argue, some more specific and immediate reasons why, when writing the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft homed in on the idea of woman as the link between man and brute. To understand these we need to consider the question of the relationship between woman and animals within the ideas of Enlightenment feminism. In spite of the long Western tradition of considering woman as a lesser being, there have always been attempts to assert woman's full human dignity and to argue that the spiritual equality of woman's soul, often acknowledged within the Christian tradition, should issue in a higher valuation of the female in mortal life. The feminism of the seventeenth-century thinkers Marie de Gournay, Anna Maria Van Schurmann, François Poulain de la Barre and others helped form the universalist concept of equality that was central to Enlightenment views.[35]

Cartesianism has been recognised as an important influence on feminist thought in the early Enlightenment.[36] Descartes' insistence on the rational capacity of human beings, their ability to seek out the truths of the universe through the operations of a mind all shared in common, held liberating potential for women. Cartesian thought, with its strong reinforcement of dualism – the dualisms of spirit and matter, mind and body, human and animal – offered the opportunity for women to shake off those old ideas tying the female to the animal body. The body could be thought of as inessential; the mind, in which what was essentially human lived, could be understood as being of no sex. Feminism could develop through and in a commitment to the rational equality of all human souls, as explained by the seventeenth-century French feminist François Poulain de la Barre:

> It is easie to be Remarked, That the Difference of Sexes, regards only the Body: there being no other, but that Part (properly) which serves for the Production of *Men*: And, the Spirit concurring no other way but by its Consent (which it lends to all after the same manner) we may conclude, That in it there is no Sex at all.[37]

It followed that women's brains worked just like men's:

> when we consider onely the Head, the sole organe of sciences, and where the soul exerciseth all its functions; the most exact Anatomy remarks to us no difference in this part between *Men*, and *Women,* their brain is altogether like to ours.[38]

Modern feminist thought has been critical of a mental liberation dependent on Cartesian dualism.[39] It required, it has been said, a turning away from women's bodies, from their gendered specificity and their sexual desires, in order to validate the unsexed mind. The standard for the human mind itself, though ostensibly unsexed, was adopted from notions of reason which were themselves developed through the symbolic exclusion of the feminine.[40] These notions

[35] S. Stuurman, 'The Deconstruction of Gender: Seventeenth-century Feminism and Modern Equality', in Knott and Taylor, *Gender and Enlightenment*, 416–33.
[36] J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4–8; H.L. Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).
[37] F. Poulain de la Barre, *The Woman as Good as the Man, or, the Equality of Both Sexes*, translated by A.L. (London, 1677), 84.
[38] Poulain de la Barre, *The Woman as Good as the Man*, 85–6.
[39] Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 44–60.
[40] Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, x, 2–3.

required women, in order to assert their full humanity, to acquiesce in the radical split between human and animal, reason and nature, which current ecological thinking sees as the root cause of attitudes and actions that are devastating the planet. Val Plumwood analyses the malaise of modern thinking as inhering in an ambition to master nature, rooted in what she calls the 'key dualism' of reason and nature. What Plumwood calls the 'master-identity' is the perspective of power, combining racial, gender and class exclusions to set up the white male euro-centric ruling class as the subject and master, marginalizing those who depart from that norm by seeing them as allied to nature, not sharing the master's full humanity and reason.[41] Different liberatory movements including feminism need to find a way to find freedom from oppression without making the mistake of aspiring to that master identity for themselves.[42] According to this analysis, one could see Enlightenment feminism, with its assertion of female rationality, as getting itself caught on the wrong side of what is now a divide between those whose humanity is fundamentally alienated from nature, that is, those for whom human progress consists in the domination of nature, and whose legacy is now producing ecological catastrophe on an unprecedented and frightening scale; and those who would tie their ideas of justice and progress to a fundamental care for the planet, who would see no true liberation for women possible outside of a full recognition that we are indeed (though of course, no more and no less so than men) animals belonging to the earth.

Recent work calls into question the dependence of early feminism on Cartesian dualism, however. Jacqueline Broad shows how women from Margaret Cavendish to Catharine Cockburn not only used Cartesian arguments, but also argued with and modified them, especially in the light of the ideas of the Cambridge Platonists, in such a way as to refuse a radical mind-body dualism, insisting instead on according importance and dignity both to bodies and animals. The traditional notion of closeness between woman and the animal could lead women philosophers to more than one reaction: not necessarily to denial, but sometimes to an unusual degree of sympathy for animals, and, especially in Cavendish, a pioneering sense of the kinship between humanity and animal.[43] At its inception, Enlightenment feminism was trying to bring together arguments for female rational equality with recognition of the body's claims and a refusal to devalue animal nature or animals themselves.

Late eighteenth-century English feminists such as Catherine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays also combined rational egalitarianism with sympathy for animals. All three wrote of the importance of opposing cruelty to animals. As I argue, however, in this period what we can call an early alliance between feminism and animal advocacy came under strong pressure from renewed attempts to define female nature along animal lines, attempts which threatened the still developing view, so crucial to feminist thought, of woman's current nature as the artificial product of an unjust society. That alliance between feminism and animal advocacy is still strong in Catherine Macaulay, as I shall show, but Wollstonecraft turns away from it.

Karen O'Brien describes Enlightenment views of women as characterised by tension between two tendencies: the 'naturalist' or biologically essentialist tendency and the 'sociological' or social constructivist tendency.[44] Eighteenth-century medical science[45] and

[41] Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 42–5.
[42] Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 64–7, 136–40.
[43] Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, 50–5.
[44] K. O'Brien, 'Introduction' to Section 1, 'Sexual Distinctions and Prescriptions', in Knott and Taylor, *Gender and Enlightenment*, 3–7.
[45] O'Brien, 'Introduction', 3.

anthropology[46] are sources for a new emphasis on the physiological and psychological differences between the sexes, in contrast to the sociological work being developed particularly by Scottish Enlightenment historians, who considered that historical progress was bringing about a 'greater social and intellectual convergence of the sexes'.[47] To understand these tensions in Enlightenment views of women we need to see eighteenth-century natural history, from which the discipline of anthropology was emerging in the late eighteenth century, as a crucially important discourse. The natural historians' discussions of animals and of the animal-human boundary had vital effects on the social and political theories of the time. The tendency within natural history to study mankind as one of the animals led to a renewed emphasis on woman's nature as defined by her sexual and reproductive role, prompting a feminist response reaffirming the importance of human difference and the centrality of un-gendered human reason. But natural history was by no means an entirely naturalist discourse in O'Brien's sense. One of its strains, as we shall see, was eminently sociological, suggesting as it did the social formation of animal bodies. It was a rich and mixed discourse with a very mixed influence.

Eighteenth-century natural historians presented accounts of the animal creation in which man appeared as one of the animals, however specially positioned among them. In Linnean taxonomy 'he' is one of the mammals (a termed coined by Linnaeus) and within that, one of the primates (also a Linnean term). Indeed Linnaeus was moving towards seeing no distinction in kind between human and animals. As he wrote to the German naturalist Johann Gmelin in 1747:

> I ask you and the whole world for a generic differentia between man and ape which conforms to the principles of natural history. I certainly know of none. […] If I were to call man ape or vice versa, I should bring down all the theologians on my head. But perhaps I should still do it according to the rules of science.[48]

Such ideas, along with Rousseau's and Monboddo's contention for the humanity of the orang-outang, had the potential to challenge human exceptionalism. They were strongly countered by other naturalists. Buffon, for example, author of the most influential account of animal life and habits, was against any attempt to do away with the boundary between human and animal. For him, humanity's distinctive difference resided outside the natural historian's province, in the immaterial soul. The orang-outang might be physically very close to humanity, but that was comparatively insignificant:

> If there was a step by which we could descend from human nature to the animal; if the essence of this nature consisted entirely in the form of the body, and depended on its organization, this ape would approach nearer to man than to any animal […] but the resemblance of the form, the conformity of the organization, and the imitation, which seem to result from those similitudes, neither bring it nearer the nature of man, nor raises it above that of animals.[49]

[46] J. Mander, 'No Woman is an Island: The Female Figure in French Enlightenment Anthropology', in Knott and Taylor, *Gender and Enlightenment*, 97–116 (99).
[47] O'Brien, 'Introduction', 3.
[48] Cited in G. Broberg, 'Homo sapiens: Linnaeus's Classification of Man', in *Linnaeus: The Man and His Work*, edited by T. Frängsmyr (Canton, MA: Watson, 1994), 156–94 (172).
[49] Buffon, *The Natural History of Animals*, vol. 3, 449–50.

In this way Buffon, like earlier thinkers, was able to subscribe to the concept of the chain of being and yet avoid its implication of human closeness to the animal by making the human link in the chain a special one, the point where a rational soul is first found.

Just as eighteenth-century naturalists held differing views on the boundary between human and animal, natural history also encompassed a variety of views (often within the same author) on the relation between the physical organization of animal bodies and the kinds of social behaviour they exhibited. We can see in it the elements of the nature-nurture debate that has carried on down to our own time. An essentialist strand of thought placed humans among the animals and saw their social arrangements as determined by their bodies. Smellie, for example, derived male dominance over women from the physical differences between the sexes:

> All the larger and more perfect animals are distinguished by the sexes of male and female. The bodies of males, though not without exceptions, are, in general, stronger, larger, and more active, than those of the females. In the human species, the male is not only larger than the female, but his muscular fibres are firmer and more compact, and his whole frame indicates a superior strength and robustness of texture. He does not acquire his full growth, and best form, till he arrives at the age of thirty years. But, in women, the parts are rounder, and their muscular fibres more feeble and lax than those of men, and their growth and form are perfect at the age of twenty. A similar observation is applicable to the minds of the two sexes. Man is, comparatively, a bold, generous, and enterprising animal. Women, on the contrary, are timid, jealous, and disposed to actions which acquire less agility and strength. Hence they are entitled to claim, and, by their amiable weaknesses, they actually receive our protection. Men are endowed with majesty of figure and force of mind; but beauty, and the graces, are the proper characteristics of women. The laxity and softness of their texture may, in some measure, account for the timidity and littlenesses of their disposition; for, when the bodies of men are relaxed by heat, or by any other cause, their minds become not only timid, but weak, undetermined, and inactive.[50]

A more social constructivist strand within natural history considered that among all animals, and not only humans, environmental circumstances could alter physical nature. A favourite theme of Buffon, taken up and disseminated by his imitators, was that the domestication and domination of animals by man had changed their appearance. Reasoning in a way that seems to anticipate elements of later Lamarckian ideas, Buffon argues in 'History of the dog' that generations of subjection to mankind have caused dogs progressively to lower their ears – a gesture of submission – so that some breeds of dog now are born with floppy ears:

> of the mastiff, and the bull-dog, the ears are still partly straight, or only half-pendant; and in their manners and sanguinary disposition they resemble the dog from which they drew their origin. The hound is the most distant of the three [from original dogs]: the long pendant ears, the docility, gentleness, and, we may say, timidity of this dog, are so many proofs of the great degeneration, or, better perhaps to express it, the great perfection, which a long state of domesticity has produced, joined to a careful, and well-followed education.[51]

Even the camel's hump, for Buffon, is a consequence of its 'slavery' as a beast of burden.[52]

[50] Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, 236.
[51] Buffon, *The Natural History of Animals*, vol. 2, 67.
[52] Buffon, *The Natural History of Animals*, vol. 4, 22.

Feminist writers in the later eighteenth century responded to these debates as they considered the natural and social states of woman. Sharon Ruston has shown that Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication* exploits the social constructivist strand within natural history to draw parallels between the domestication of dogs and horses and the domestication of women. To thinkers like Rousseau, James Fordyce and John Gregory, who would argue that women's submissive behaviour towards and endeavours to attract men demonstrate that they are naturally formed for a state of dependence, Wollstonecraft retorted that many generations of tyranny had caused women to degenerate, just as spaniels had degenerated into floppy-eared pets. Servitude, she wrote, 'not only debases the individual, but its effects seem to be transmitted to posterity. Considering the length of time that women have been dependent, is it surprising that some of them hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel?'[53] Unlike Buffon, who was unsure whether to praise or deplore dogs' descent into docility, Wollstonecraft was quite clear that domestication marked a decline in animals and women. Her ideas were taken up in feminist thinking at the end of the century. In her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain, in Behalf of the Women* (1798), Wollstonecraft's friend Mary Hays developed the idea of women as tormented animals, their obedience and seeming content the end result of cruel training:

> EVEN inferior animals are taught not only to dance, but to dance to appearance in time, and with alacrity, when their tyrant pipes. Bears and Turkeys for example. But we ought not to forget, that to produce these wonderful exertions; the first have had their eyes put out, to render them more docile to the cruel caprice of man; and that nothing less than hot iron applied to the feet of the latter, had furnished that singular spectacle, with which many had the barbarity to be amused.
>
> So alas! women often go through scenes with apparent cheerfulness, that did the most indifferent spectators, but consider what such appearances must have previously cost them, they would execrate the mean and sordid tyranny.[54]

Later in the text Hays generalises the point to make a statement about the origin of racial and sexual inequalities:

> I hold it as an infallible truth, and a truth that few will attempt to deny; that any race of people, or I should rather say any class of rational being, – though by no means inferior originally in intellectual endowments, – may be held in a state of subjection and dependence from generation to generation, by another party, who, by a variety of circumstances, none of them depending on actual, original superiority of mind, may have established an authority over them. And it must be acknowledged a truth equally infallible, that any class so held in a state of subjection and dependence, will degenerate both in body and mind.[55]

In this way, natural history made a positive contribution to the development of a feminist analysis of socially produced inequality. Its more essentialist strand, however, in which natural bodily differences were understood to lead to natural relations of power and dominance, presented problems for feminist thinking. Wollstonecraft is the feminist thinker who tackles this issue head-on. Throughout the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she makes references to men's superiority of bodily strength, a trait she explicitly associates, in the first edition, with a male sexual aggression assumed to exist in all animals, man included: 'the male pursues, the female yields – this is the law

[53] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 152; Ruston, 'Natural Rights and Natural History', 67–8.
[54] M. Hays, *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of the Women* (London, 1798), 58.
[55] Hays, *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*, 69.

of nature; and it does not seem to be suspended or abrogated in favour of woman'.[56] As Wollstonecraft's editors observe, the changes made between the first and second editions of the *Vindication* move in the direction of 'a more definite acceptance of equality between the sexes'.[57] Where the first edition attributes 'this physical superiority' to men, the second allows only 'a degree of physical superiority'.[58] Nevertheless, the new trend within natural history and its offshoot, an emergent anthropology, towards seeing the mind as determined by the body, continued to influence and trouble the text. 'I find that strength of mind has, in most cases, been accompanied by superior strength of body', Wollstonecraft remarks,[59] and geniuses like Shakespeare and Milton 'must have had iron frames'. The tone becomes uneasy at this point: 'I am aware that this argument would carry me further than it may be supposed I would wish to go', she acknowledges. Men's bodily strength is a superiority, but the two sexes should aim for virtue and knowledge that would be 'the same in nature, if not in degree'.[60] Wollstonecraft's concession that 'from the constitution of their bodies, men seem designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue'[61] contrasts with the confident declaration of the equality of the female soul, and therefore brain, in the earlier feminist Poulain de la Barre, indicating the extent to which new physicalist ideas challenged egalitarian positions. Moreover, even Wollstonecraft's insistence on the similar nature of the sexes' virtue used terms that others were beginning to apply to the relation between species: the argument that the mental powers of animals differed in degree rather than in nature from men's was one of the more radical ideas held by some of the natural historians, including Smellie. With arguments from natural history pushing her in directions she did not wish to go, Wollstonecraft turned towards a dualist position. Her arguments for women's potential depended on her considering men and women in something other than their physical or animal aspect; and this affected her views of the relation between humans and animals. For her, what humans shared with animals was, in traditional fashion, the lower part of their nature.

We can begin to bring Wollstonecraft's views on the animal-human relation into focus by comparing some of her ideas with those of her closest feminist inspiration, Catherine Macaulay. Macaulay's *Letters on Education* is an important source for Wollstonecraft's claim that women are currently in a degraded, unnatural state. Macaulay proclaims a radical social constructivism that she derives from Lord Monboddo:

> It is the capital and distinguishing characteristic of our species, says lord Monboddo, that we can make ourselves as it were over again, so that the original nature is so little obvious, that it is with great difficulty we can distinguish it from the acquired.
>
> The attention I have given to my own character, Hortensia, and to the means by which it has been formed, obliges me to subscribe, without reserve, to this opinion of the Scottish sage, viz. that man, in a state of society, is as artificial a being as his representation on the canvas of the painter. Nature indeed supplies the raw materials, and the capacity of the workman; but the effect is the mere production of art. I have often smiled, when I have heard persons talk of their natural propensities; for I am convinced, that these have undergone so great a change by domestic education, and the converse of the world, that their primitive modes are not in many beings even discernable [sic].[62]

[56] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 74.
[57] M. Butler and J. Todd, 'Introduction', in Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 61.
[58] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 74.
[59] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 207.
[60] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 108.
[61] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 95.
[62] Macaulay, *Letters on Education*, 10–11.

Monboddo's belief in human self-fashioning serves Macaulay to develop her argument about the progressive possibilities of education. In important respects, then, her argument emphasizes human uniqueness. In other ways, though, she lays a special emphasis on human kinship with animals. The first of the *Letters*, in which she argues for the importance of her subject, opens strikingly on an assertion of the immortality of animal souls. The reader has to assume that prior to the text, Macaulay has been putting forward the argument for animal souls to her friend. She opens: 'So you approve, Hortensia, of what I have advanced in favour of the future existence of brute animals',[63] and quickly goes on to deplore human exaggeration of the difference between ourselves and other animals:

> it raises in me a mixed sentiment of contempt and anger, to hear the vain and contradictory creature, man, addressing the deity, as the god of all perfection, yet dealing out a severe and short mortality to the various tribes of his fellow animals, and assigning to himself an eternity of happiness, beyond even the reach of his imagination. What was man, before he was called into existence, but the dust of the earth? Can the meanest insect be less; and if man and brute were on an equal footing before the almighty *fiat* went forth, what motive, worthy of divine wisdom, could influence the deity to draw the line of separation thus wide between his creatures?[64]

She calls on the clergy to lead a campaign against cruelty to animals:

> I […] have often wondered that the clergy have not […] laid more force on the necessity of extending our benevolence to the dumb animals, and that they have not in particular more strongly and more repeatedly reprobated every species of cruelty towards them, as opposite to the dictates both of natural and received religion.[65]

For Macaulay, God's love of all animals and provision of an afterlife for them is a necessary part of his complete power and benevolence; and it is on the concept of God's all-powerful and all-encompassing benevolence that she pins her argument for the social improvements that humans can effect through the right kinds of education and self-fashioning. In this way her feminist remarks on the need to reform women's education are linked with, because depending on the same reasoning as, her animal advocacy.

If we turn from Macaulay to the opening of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, we immediately notice a striking difference of tone. Wollstonecraft opens with a call to go back to 'first principles' so as to found a new vision of society on 'simple truths'. In order to do this she asks and answers a few 'plain questions':

> In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist? The answer is as clear as that a half is less than the whole; in Reason.
>
> What acquirement exalts one being above another? Virtue; we spontaneously reply.
>
> For what purpose were the passions implanted? That man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes; whispers Experience.[66]

[63] Macaulay, *Letters on Education*, 1.
[64] Macaulay, *Letters on Education*, 1–2.
[65] Macaulay, *Letters on Education*, 6.
[66] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 81.

Where Macaulay opened on what we share with our fellow animals, Wollstonecraft opens on what distinguishes us from them. The differences between them should not be exaggerated. Their opinions on human-animal relations agree in all essentials. Both consider humanity distinguished by reason; both deplore cruelty to animals. Wollstonecraft's 1788 children's book, *Original Stories from Real Life*, opened with three chapters centred on the treatment of animals.[67] Like other children's writers of the time, such as Dorothy Kilner and Sarah Trimmer, she taught kindness to animals as an important duty, but like them she stressed human separation: animals lack reason, and kindness to them serves, among other things, as a means for children to demonstrate their human superiority.[68] In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, probably influenced here by Macaulay, Wollstonecraft speculated on animal afterlife in a footnote: 'I do not now mean to discuss the intricate subject of their [animals'] mortality; reason may, perhaps, be given to them in the next stage of existence, if they are to mount in the scale of life, like men, by the medium of death'.[69] In the second *Vindication* she argued that boys' cruelty to brutes would turn later into 'domestic tyranny over wives, children, and servants', recommended that kindness to animals be taught in national schools,[70] and considered that '[j]ustice, or even benevolence, will not be a powerful spring of action unless it extend to the whole creation'.[71] The emphasis of the two writers, however, is very different, because their discussions of animal life are being put to very different uses. For Macaulay, the same reasoning that leads her to conclude that women need a rational education leads her also to emphasize human fellowship with animals. For Wollstonecraft, woman's place in a humanity radically distinguished from animal life is the foundation of feminist argument.

What is the source of this difference? Macaulay's stance on animals derives from her religious framework: a progressive Anglicanism in tune with elements of rational Dissent,[72] which allows her to promote the idea of kinship and sympathy between human and animal without disturbing her sense of woman's human superiority. The notion of the chain of being works for her as a way of expressing a close relation between human and animal in which the animal remains subordinate, but the status difference is de-emphasised. Wollstonecraft's religious outlook has a lot in common with Macaulay's, and like Macaulay, she makes religious belief a base for feminist argument.[73] But for Wollstonecraft, writing in 1792, two works which she had read in the preceding couple of years, and against which she had had a strong reaction, shattered the alliance between women's advocacy and animal advocacy, prompted a strong reassertion of human exceptionalism, and led her to reject the concept of the chain of being. These works were Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History*, and Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

We have already seen already how Smellie's notion of gender relations ran directly counter to the ideas Wollstonecraft was developing through her reading of Macaulay. Smellie derived woman's weaker constitution of mind from her weaker body, and he was enthusiastic in his praise of female modesty, considered as an instinct, 'the great defence with which Nature has

[67] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 4, 367–79.
[68] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 4, 372. See T. Cosslett, *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction, 1786–1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
[69] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 31.
[70] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 243.
[71] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 244.
[72] S. Hutton, 'Liberty, Equality and God: The Religious Roots of Catherine Macaulay's Feminism', in Knott and Taylor, *Gender and Enlightenment*, 538–50.
[73] B. Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

armed [females] against the artifices and deceit of the males'.[74] Far from being the product of refined civilization, modesty linked women to animals. Rooted in resistance to sexual advances, it was 'by no means confined to the human species'; indeed, Smellie noted that even female insects 'repel the first attacks of the males', and commented, '[i]f this is not modesty, it has all the effects of it'.[75] Wollstonecraft does not discuss this side of Smellie's work in her *Analytical* review, but she certainly noticed it. In chapter 4 of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she takes issue with Smellie's view, itself derived from Buffon, that women mature by 20, men not till 30. Referring to 'some naturalists' who have made this claim, she suggests 'that they reason on false ground, led astray by the male prejudice, which deems beauty the perfection of women […] whilst male beauty is allowed to have some connection with the mind'.[76] Thus she offers an early feminist critique of the supposed objectivity and neutrality of male-authored science.

Smellie's understanding of gender difference depended on seeing the mind as essentially part of the body and determined by it. This anti-Cartesianism characterises his discussion of human-animal relations as well. Where Buffon argued that it is not man's bodily conformity with the bodies of animals but his spiritual difference from them that counts, Smellie concentrated on bodily similarities, and tended to emphasize the connections between human and animal. He considered that those who denied mind to non-human animals, considering in Cartesian fashion that they were only machines, were mistaken. Animals' instincts ranged from simple ones like an infant's instinct to suck, to more complex ones that could adapt behaviour to different circumstances, and which could be altered by experience and observation. The distinction usually made between human reason and animal instinct was a false one. 'No such distinction exists', he declared: 'the reasoning faculty itself is a necessary result of instinct'.[77] Man just has more instincts than other animals:

> The superiority of man over the other animals seems to depend chiefly on the great number of instincts with which his mind is endowed. Traces of every instinct he possesses are discoverable in the brute creation. But no particular species enjoys the whole. On the contrary, most species are limited to a small number. This appears to be the reason why the instincts of brutes are stronger, and more steady in their operation, than those of man. A being activated by a great variety of motives must necessarily reason, or, in other words, hesitate in his choice.[78]

While a feminist must call Smellie socially conservative in his views on women, an advocate for animals must acknowledge his progressive stance on human-animal relations. The latter should not be exaggerated: Smellie is still committed to a belief in 'the superiority of man over the other animals', but it is a superiority based on a difference in degree, not of kind, between them. Man is part of the same chain of being, and in complete agreement with the logic of the principle of continuity, Smellie considers it possible that some animals may approach near to humanity even in that supposedly distinctive human quality of mind. He summarizes his discussion of instinct in this way:

> This view of instinct is simple, removes every objection to the existence of mind in brutes, and unfolds all their actions, by referring them to motives perfectly similar to those by which man is actuated. There

[74] Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, 237.
[75] Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, 238.
[76] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 138; see Buffon, *Natural History, General and Particular*, vol. 2, 436.
[77] Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, 144–5.
[78] Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, 152.

> is, perhaps, a greater difference between the mental powers of some animals than between man and the most sagacious brutes.[79]

In Wollstonecraft's review of Smellie, it is his discussion of instinct and animal mind to which she most strongly objects:

> That 'there is, perhaps, a greater difference between the mental powers of some animals than there is between those of man and the most sagacious brutes.' – Here we differ. – Again; 'Instincts may be considered as so many internal senses, of which some animals have a greater, and others a smaller number. These senses in different species, are likewise more or less ductile; and the animals possessing them are, of course, more or less susceptible of improving, and of acquiring knowledge'.
>
> We acknowledge that we do not clearly comprehend what the author means […] *by more or less ductile* – unless in his ardour to prove that animals have minds similar to the human intellect, he meant to deprive us of souls. [Wollstonecraft's italics][80]

Wollstonecraft's objection is to Smellie's view that mental powers can be explained as part of bodily processes – a view that grew rapidly during the late eighteenth century, influenced by Petrus Camper's anatomical comparisons of men and orang-outangs. A new emphasis on the mental effects of physical differences in skulls and brains potentially threatened the Cartesian feminist argument that the sexlessness of souls ensured the fundamental mental equality of the sexes. For anthropological thinkers like Blumenbach, Camper and Herder, man's superiority over the animals was guaranteed not by a rational soul but by the superior functioning of bodily organs.[81] In the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft continues her response to this physicalist trend in late eighteenth-century thought, sardonically broaching the idea that since souls have no sex, women's 'inferiority must depend on the organs'.[82] Her argument against this physicalist view of female inferiority rests on the appeal to a God-given reason separable from the body.

For Wollstonecraft, then, Smellie's picture of humans as instinctive animals threatens to rob us of the distinction on which she was to build her feminist case. Faced with Smellie's version of the chain of being, a version in which the orang-outang's physical closeness to humanity indicates close mental affinities between us, she is moved to scoff at the whole notion of the chain linking us to animals:

> The elephant is undoubtedly the most sagacious of animals, consequently, is the next link to man in this fanciful chain, but Mr. S. forgetting what he has recounted of its abilities, makes it give way to the orang-outang, only because the outward form of the latter has a nearer resemblance to the human body. 'Man,' he tells us, 'in his lowest condition, is evidently linked, both in the form of his body, and the capacity of his mind, to the large and small orang-outangs.' – Then he is far inferior to the elephant – but we dispute the fact.[83]

The traditional notion that the elephant was one of the most intelligent of beasts did not disturb in the way that the elevation of the orang-outang did. Elephants do not look like us. Chimpanzees

[79] Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, 156.
[80] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 7, 295–6.
[81] Wokler, 'The Ape Debates', 1172–3.
[82] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 103.
[83] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 7, 300.

do, and as we have seen, the belief in the orang-outang as the missing link in the chain was coupled with the notion that the Hottentots formed another link on the human side, and that it was in sexual congress with Hottentot females that male orang-outangs demonstrated both their beastliness and their affinity with humanity. A further disturbing closeness between ape and human was suggested by the emerging view that it was only in bodily organs that the two differed. For all these reasons, Wollstonecraft found in the notion of orang-outang as missing link implications that threatened to reduce woman, her mind like the orang-outang's determined by her body, to being something similar to but not quite measuring up to 'mankind': 'the link which unites man with brutes'.

Wollstonecraft's use of this highly charged phrase was also influenced, I suggest, by Edmund Burke, whose 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France* contained some highly provocative remarks on the effects of revolutionary thinking on women's status. Burke was scathing about those revolutionary social theorists who, influenced by Rousseau's ideas on inequality, wanted to dismantle the unnatural social distinctions produced by an artificial society, and to move towards a natural state of equality. In his view, this would be a return to a state of savagery. Drawing on the by now long tradition of Enlightenment thinking that equated social progress with a gentler and more respectful treatment of women, he used the status of women as a touchstone for the good society; but it was in medieval times, when the code of chivalry operated, that he placed the height of progress. Burke complained that in the post-Revolutionary world chivalry was dead, and that without the 'pleasing illusions, which made power gentle', there is left only a world of naked aggression: 'In this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order'.[84] In other words, without royalty and the civilisation it upholds, humanity will move back to a savage state in which woman's physical weakness will leave her subject to the full force of man's dominance without any of the factors that currently soften it. Wollstonecraft, revolutionary that she was, had to rise to that challenge, and find a way to uncouple female dignity from that of kings and queens. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* she emphasized the importance of natural rights derived from human status: people, however low in rank, are not to be treated as brute beasts:

> It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights.[85]

She tackled Burke's explosive claim about woman as animal directly, setting a democratic sense of humans' necessary commitment to each other against his standard of humanity as aristocratic hierarchy. She quoted his phrase: 'On this scheme of things a king *is* but a man; a queen *is* but a woman; a woman *is* but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order', with the comment: ' – All true, Sir; if she is not more attentive to the duties of humanity than queens and fashionable ladies in general are'.[86] In her review of Smellie's work, Wollstonecraft accuses him of denying, by implication, the existence of the human soul. In the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* she accuses Burke, more specifically, of denying a soul to women. Taking him to task for

[84] E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 171.
[85] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 14.
[86] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 25.

having, in his *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful*, equated littleness, beauty and femininity, and for having defined woman as a creature designed to please man, she says that the logical end of his views is that 'if virtue has any other foundation than worldly utility, you have clearly proved that one half of the human species, at least, have not souls'.[87]

In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft returns to the status of woman as animal, and, as we have seen, concedes that in physical terms men have the advantage. Seen simply as physical, as animal, woman would indeed, in her view, be an animal not of the highest order. Yet Wollstonecraft is absolutely committed to the first two of Burke's ventriloquised Revolutionary positions: a king *is* but a man, and a queen *is* but a woman. So everything depends on her denying the link between these and the third proposition: a woman is but an animal. When she speculates on woman as the link which unites man with brutes she is offering a challenge to Burke: a challenge to live the Revolution. Maybe without the trappings of the old civilization, women would just be subordinate animals, but Wollstonecraft's faith in woman's share of humanity's unique rationality made her willing to take the risk.

In conclusion, we can see that natural history had a significant influence on the development of eighteenth-century feminism. Some elements in the natural historians' work encouraged a sociological analysis of the historical causes of women's degeneration from an original equality to an unnatural slavery. More prominent though, were the essentialist interpretations of the relation between bodily and mental powers, and of female qualities shared across species, that served to naturalise female subordination. These prompted Wollstonecraft's restatement of women's share in a fundamental human difference from animals. Enlightenment feminism was not essentially or originally committed to human-animal dualism: indeed a recurrent strain within it was a reminder of the kinship between animal and human and a call for humane treatment of animals. But for the major late-Enlightenment feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, particular pressures from the natural historians' interpretation of humanity's relationship with the orang-outang, coupled with the Revolutionary debate over women's status in the controversial state of nature, pushed her work towards an uncompromising restatement of humanity's monopoly on reason, and a reinforcement of the barrier between human and animal nature. The *Vindication*'s radicalism on women went along with a conservative view of humanity's relationship to animals.

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[87] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. 5, 45.